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ABSTRACT

Rural Ministry Resources (RMR) was started in the early 1970s by the Rev. King Rockhill in order to meet the needs of ministers from various denominations who served rural communities in the Pacific Northwest. Executives from subscribing denominations and local parishes established a formal, representative board of directors to set policy and evaluate programs. RMR has flourished because it specialized in meeting unique needs of rural churches--and other "small" churches having similar needs. RMR has also had a growing capacity to match needs with helpful resources. It established four program areas: continuing education, parish development, pastoral support, and contract services. The director also continues to participate in educational activities and engage in a variety of jobs that bring him close to many types of people. Based on the RMR experience, some recommendations can be made for other adult education organizations: (1) listen carefully to needs of prospective clients; (2) experiment with low-cost sample programs; (3) enable early participants to become advocates for further support from within their own organizations; (4) create a representative decision-making body to allocate and remain responsible for resources; (5) identify new programs as effective ways for responsible executives to meet their obligation to their constituencies; (6) broaden the means, matching needs with resources; (7) support the programmer's own learning; and (8) link up with other organizations. (KC)

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GROWING RESPONSIVE ORGANIZATIONS:

THE EXPERIENCE OF RURAL MINISTRY RESOURCES, INC.

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Growing Responsive Organizations:

The Experience of Rural Ministry Resources

Introduction

This is the first three chapters in a story about Rural Ministry Resources. It has taken twelve years to write this much and the struggle is on to write a fourth -- an even tougher chapter.

The "RMR Story" suggests some ideas about growing new, more responsive organizations for adult learning. These are organizations that may respond to adult learning needs which established bureaucracies may not recognize, do not care about, or lack resources to deal with.

The first chapter relates how RMR got started; the second, how RMR became accepted within the fabric of already existing organizations; and, the third, how RMR has sustained itself for a decade.

Chapter 1 - Getting Started

In the early 1970's, the Rev. King Rockhill served as a campus minister for students at a land-grant university located in the Inland Empire within the Pacific Northwest. To help him plan his campus program, he consulted ministers in communities from which the students came; many of them were rural communities.

King observed that the ministers themselves very openly described their needs -- making a transition from training in an urban-oriented seminary to living in a small, isolated rural community; settling into a human service role among residents with their own "rural rhythms"; relating to a denominational bureaucracy that required attention to rural parishes without providing a great deal of personal guidance...

King responded to this general need by offering a colloquium series. Each day-long "Colloquium on Rural Ministry" focused on a theme: rural population trends, rural community decision making, economics of human services in isolated communities, dynamics of "smallness"... For each, King invited resource persons -- a demographer, a rural sociologist, an economist; some came from the nearby land-grant universities.

Each program was low key, low cost... but intensive, involving, interactive, personalized, and helpful to professional leaders from a mix of denominations. "Ruralness" -- not a church denomination -- was a common denominator.

In 1975, King resigned his campus ministry to incorporate Rural Ministry Resources (RMR) and to work half-time as its director. He launched RMR with financial underwriting from the regional offices of several main-line denominations in the Pacific Northwest. He was "it"; he was RMR, with access to a part-time secretary and telephone.

Chapter 2 - Getting to "OK"

What rendered a sense of legitimacy toward RMR? After all, each denomination had its own responsibility to its leadership in rural areas. And, besides, in such a cooperative effort, how would a denominational administration be assured that its contribution would benefit its ministers and parishioners?

Several things contributed. First, the mix of ministers in the early colloquium series expressed their enthusiasm and advocated that their denominations grant additional support for King to continue to work in their communities across denominational lines.

Second, executives from subscribing denominations and "consumers" in local parishes established a formal, representative, Board of Directors.

The Board set policy about the budget and program; annually it evaluated programs in terms of RMR's charge, clients' perceptions and sponsors' expectations.

Third, was King himself - his empathy, insights, vision of alternatives, knowledge of resources, and an uncanny capacity to connect with people, personally, and to help people in one community connect with others in nearby communities.

Fourth, RMR took root in the Inland Empire close to the people it served. In contrast, a somewhat parallel effort based in Seattle flashed spectacularly, then withered, because, even though it was awarded executive sanction, it did not win identity among its clientele, nor the loyalty of a "we-grew-it-ourselves" kind of organization.

In short, it became "OK" for a denomination to support RMR because:

- the denomination's constituency said it found the RMR "sampler" helpful;
- an ongoing, representative body of decision makers and users was incorporated to guide the allocation of additional resources and serve as a locus of accountability;
- the proven talent of the Director helped RMR become recognized as an effective way to assist the denominations in meeting their responsibilities to rural church leaders; and
- the Director was available continuously, locally, out among the clientele themselves...an itinerant minister for ministers and lay leaders.

Chapter 3 - Sustaining the Upstart

So far, RMR has sprouted and become accepted. This third chapter focuses on the contributions to its continuance.

Certainly, the four elements introduced earlier -- a recognized and persistent need, a decision-making body, the power of a personality, and the power of proximity -- have contributed a great deal.

In addition, here are three other positive forces.

First, RMR specialized to meet unique needs. This has at least two parts: the definition of the need itself and the capacity to respond to the need.

Rural churches are often small congregations. Small congregations run on a different energy from large churches. As Carl Dudley* says, small churches often run on "AC" power, generated among "Affectional Christians;" large churches are run by "DC" -- "Directional Christians."

"AC" power is drawn from people who relate to each other horizontally, individually, personally. "DC" power comes more from positions arranged hierarchically within a bureaucratic pyramid. The agenda -- the work -- that gets done on AC power is caring for people and their concerns here and now. The agenda for which DC power is harnessed includes an emphasis on abstract goals, objectives, plans, external accountability. These differences between AC and DC energy influenced the Board's view of church, church in community, local parish within a denominational structure and the requisite leadership for a small church.

That view also prompted the Board to recognize that rural churches are not the only small churches; many neighborhood churches in urban communities, as well, are "small." This point of view caught the attention of denominational executives also pondering the future of their small parishes in urban areas.

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*Carl Dudley, Affectional and Directional Orientations to Faith, 1982, Alban Institute, Washington, D.C.

So, gradually, the need that attracted RMR changed from "rural" to "small" -- whether rural or urban. However, for a variety of reasons, the Board retained "rural" in the name: "Rural Ministry Resources."

The second part of RMR's specializing is a growing capacity to match the need and a helpful resource.

By this time, RMR had developed four major program areas; each program area was a means to build professional and lay leadership in local churches in small communities. These four program areas are continuing education (for example, the Colloquium on Rural Ministry); parish development (local organizational development); pastoral support (one-to-one consultation) and contract services (anything else RMR could do for which others supplied the money!)

The key here is that RMR had developed a repertoire of services and could select -- or invent -- a response appropriate to a need in a given setting.

The goal remained singular -- to build professional and lay leadership in small community parishes; the means broadened and the process of selecting the means became more flexible, more adaptable, more responsive. The relative emphasis across all program areas, through these twelve years, varied a great deal, depending on demand. In that sense, then, RMR remained reactive -- responding to immediate needs of local leaders in small parishes. RMR, intentionally, elected not to push its goals, its programs.

In another sense, RMR's reactive (responsive) stance meant that its continuing education programs became a marginal activity, an intermediate means, or instrument, supportive of other, local, objectives - such as enabling the new preacher to settle into a new environment, projecting the

future of an otherwise dying congregation or creating a new alliance among a cluster of parishes.

So, RMR became recognized as a resource with a larger matrix of capabilities:

The Goal: Develop
Lay and Professional
Leadership in Small Churches

The Means:

RMR's Program Areas	Rural Settings	Urban Settings
Continuing Education		
Parish Development	(Each cell, intersection, represents	
Pastoral Support	a possible match)	
Contract Services		

In addition to specializing on leadership in small parishes, a second contribution to sustaining RMR was the Director's own special blend of continuing education activities. Besides being an ordained minister, King, as Director, is a historian. He uses this discipline as a way of learning about a parish and community. For example, in his parish development work he asks members of a congregation to tell him their "story" about their church (and, in such a way, not so incidentally, to tell their histories to each other.) He reads the congregation and community through the recall of the current actors, a powerful curriculum indeed.

Second, King regularly participates in formal continuing education. For example, he has participated in workshops offered by Carl Dudley, mentioned earlier. The Board expects this and supports it.

Third, King does not work full time as Director of RMR, and quite deliberately so. He does what small church ministers often do: he serves

as minister for more than one parish; he helps to establish improved health care in isolated communities; he volunteers time to youth organizations; he farms; he raises Christmas trees. Doing what his constituency does is his laboratory. Among his clientele, that breadth of work enhances his effectiveness even further.

So, because of his own continued learning inside and outside of the Inland Empire, King, and thereby RMR, have become recognized as a learning resource that can readily link a wide range of ideas, possibilities and alternatives to the history, needs and aspirations of parishioners in rapidly changing congregations and communities.

Two contributions to RMR's success, then, are: (1) RMR's specializing in its mission with a broader range of methods and (2) the Director's blend of strategies to continue his own learning.

A third contributor is the Director's collaboration with allied groups that give special attention to the farm crisis, the farm labor situation, economics of limited resource farming, local government education, building support systems for injured workers or for teen parents. King often speaks on their programs, consults with their designers, participates in planning their programs, or serves as an observer/evaluator.

These extras are taxing, indeed. But a social exchange develops and in the long run the trade-offs help to make RMR's programs more focused, more specialized; they add to the vividness, realness, of RMR's programs; they help others associate RMR with <u>their</u> interests; they help link communities that share common concerns.

<u>Possible Guidelines</u>

Thus, based on an evaluation of twelve years of experience with RMR, the Board offers some capsule recommendations for growing other responsive adult education organizations:

1. Listen carefully to needs of prospective clients; do not put clients into boxes others build; search for common needs; be open to new definitions of need as they evolve;

2. In timely ways, experiment with low-cost sample programs;

3. Enable early participants to become advocates for further support from within their own organizations;

4. Create a representative decision-making body to allocate and remain accountable for new resources contributed cooperatively from several sources;

5. Identify new programs as effective ways for responsible executives to meet their obligation to their constituencies;

6. Select a programmer with whom sponsors can readily identify, and who will work in close proximity with persons within the sponsor's charge;

7. Continually seek to define and become more specialized in a distinct mission or goal;

8. Broaden the repertoire of means, methods;

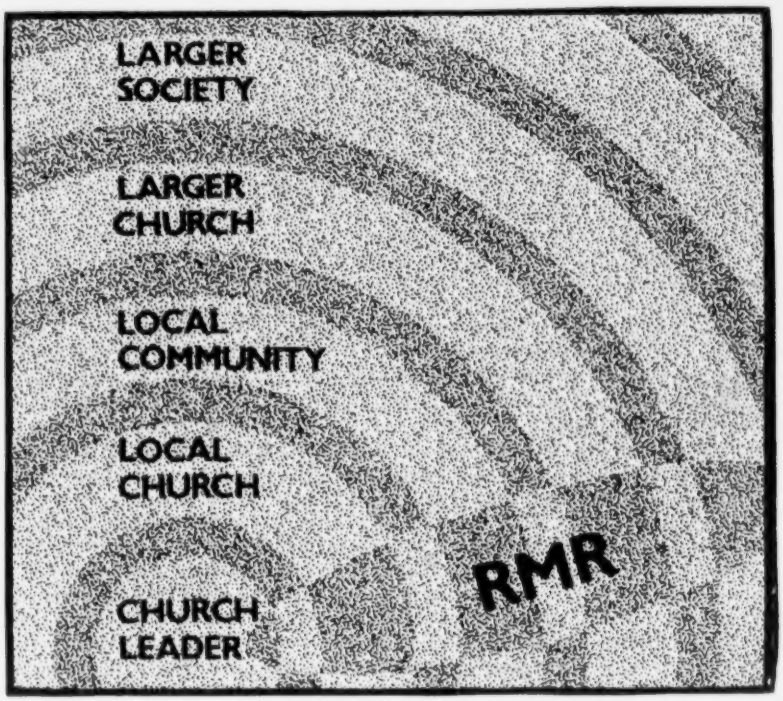
9. Caringly match the alternative method to the end within the unique situation at hand;

10. Using a spirit of entrepreneurship, seek ways to demonstrate the organization's ability to apply its proven competence in new settings;

11. Support the programmer's own learning, from within the target constituency, from others outside and from his/her own day-to-day experiences and reflections;

12. Link the new organization with other, allied groups in order to build a comparative advantage and a mutual exchange of benefits;

13. In short, plug into both kinds of power -- the "AC" energy of people and small community and the "DC" energy of institutions, organizations. This graph depicts RMR's capacity to tap into each ripple within the total system.



A Perplexing Chapter 4

Chapter 4 has yet to be written -- how to maintain an innovative organization beyond the immediate dedication and talent of a given personality. The Board anticipates this need and grapples with alternatives: write RMR's own history for a new generation? use volunteer associates? employ understudies? The Board wants to make its choice in such a way that it does not over-institutionalize the program, which itself grew out of unique needs that individual bureaucracies did not satisfy.

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